

Carbon Dating

by Louis B. Rosenberg



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SPRING INTO SCIFI : 2021 EDITION

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It was a quiet restaurant filled mostly with young couples on dates. At a small table in a shadowy corner was Gordon Pines, all alone, his eyes glued to the empty seat across from him. Balding and wearing oddly thick glasses, he looked older than his 65 years would suggest. He also looked tired. That's because he was tired, exhausted by life itself.

"Water?" rang a voice.

Gordon slowly turned. From his grim expression, you might think he was annoyed about being stuck in that cramped little corner by the kitchen, but he had requested the location. Hell, he would have asked for a table in the kitchen if he could.

"Would – you – like – some – water?" the waiter repeated, loud and slow, now assuming he was speaking to someone hard of hearing.

"No – I – do – not – want – water," Gordon fired back, deliberately louder and slower than the waiter. Then in a normal voice, "But, I could use a drink."

"We have a wonderful wine list," the waiter smiled. He then gestured oddly above the table, as if unrolling an invisible scroll. "As you can see, our selections range from—"

"Forget it," Gordon interrupted and abruptly looked down at his menu.

Perplexed, the waiter retreated with a nod.

Silent seconds passed, then a tipsy woman giggled at a table nearby. The sound made Gordon cringe, as it reminded him how much he hated being alone, especially for meals. Of course he also hated being with other people, so –

"Dad, I'm sorry," a young man rushed over. "I had a meeting that just wouldn't end."

This was Lonny Pines, dressed sharp.

"It's 8:30," Gordon noted with tone.

"I know, I know." Lonny took off his jacket and sat. "And believe me, I realize how much you hate doing restaurants alone, but—"

"It's fine," Gordon huffed. "You get used to it."

"Dad..."

Gordon's gaze fell back to his menu. Lonny didn't press the issue, instead welcoming the silence. That's when another giggle rang, this time from a middle-aged couple lifting wine glasses for a toast. Gordon glanced over as the man drew an invisible circle in the air with his finger, making a large smiley face between him and his date. The pair admired the invisible drawing and then clinked their glasses upon it, laughing.

Gordon stared for moment then scoffed, "I'm obsolete."

"That's ridiculous," Lonny tossed. "They say 65 is the new 50."

"Yeah, and I'm the new Brad Pitt."

"Jeez Dad, you need to snap out of this funk. It's been—"

Lonny suddenly fell silent, distracted by something off to his left. An apologetic smile, then he reached upward, tapping an invisible button in the air. "Hi Honey," he said to an unseen person before him. "Yeah, I'm out with dad. No, he's... *great*."

Gordon grunted.

Lonny listened to words that only he could hear, then replied – "I agree, they should be punished." He then looked off to his right. "Do you kids think it's okay to leave a mess like that in the bathroom? Do you?"

A tense silence, then Lonny hit another invisible button, ending the link.

"Sorry, it's been a crazy day."

SPRING INTO SCIFI : 2021 EDITION

Gordon ignored him, brooding over his menu.

Lonny studied his father, recalling how happy he once was, how optimistic, the life of every party. That's when Lonny blurted – “You need to start dating.”

Gordon tensed, but didn't look up.

“It's not like it was when you were young. They have terrific new apps.”

“I've seen the apps,” Gordon spat.

“No, *Carbon apps*. You need Carbons.”

“I've got Specs,” Gordon defended, gesturing to his thick coke-bottle glasses.

“Jesus... that's half your problem. Those glasses make you look ridiculous.”

“You gave me these.”

“Five years ago – I'm surprised they still work.”

“They work fine.” Gordon pressed a button on his glasses and the lenses brightened. Now, as he gazed upon his son, he saw a panel of simple data floating in the air – basic facts about the restaurant, local weather and traffic, even how many times he and Lonny had eaten together over the last six months.

That's when the waiter returned. “Do you gentlemen need more time, or-”

“Any specials?” Gordon asked, eager to change the subject.

“Of course!” And with a grand gesture, the waiter slid his arm over the table, his palm upward, as if supporting a tray of food. Of course his hand was empty, at least to Gordon whose hardware didn't support immersive overlays. “As you can see, we have organic braised-”

“Forget it.” Gordon shot.

Lonny smiled at the server, “*I think we need another minute.*”

As the waiter departed, Lonny got firm. “Dad, this isn't just about dating. You're missing out on half the world. It's like you don't... fully... exist.”

Gordon's eyes went wide.

“I'm sorry,” Lonny softened. “It just pains me to see your life passing you by.”

“I'm good,” Gordon insisted.

“No, you're not.”

Father and son shared a moment, eyes locked, the younger Pine holding firm.

“Fine,” Gordon exhaled. “I'll get a pair. Happy?”

“*Of Carbons...* good ones?”

Gordon nodded, surprised how relieved his son looked. Was this really so important? Either way, he pushed back lightly with a smirk – “*But they better not bug my eyes.*”

“You?” Lonny laughed. “How could anything bug you?”

#

A small woman in a white lab coat stood beside large optometry machine, its surface covered in dials and levers. Flipping between settings, she asked – “Better, or worse?”

“Better,” replied Gordon from behind the contraption.

“Brighter, or darker?” She adjusted a lever. “Brighter or-”

“Brighter.”

“Perfect,” and the technician pulled the machine forward, revealing Gordon squinting as he reached for his old glasses. She grabbed them first. “You don't need those.”

“But I have to wait for-”

“No waiting,” and she led Gordon out of the exam room.

It was one of many such rooms on the far side of a busy Apple store. The place was bustling with customers, everyone fingering the air as they explored apps that Gordon couldn't see. He followed the technician past a circle of young kids playing on the floor.

"Steady..." a mom said to a small boy as he reached towards an invisible object at the center of the group, his hand outstretched, eyes wide.

"Go... Go... Go," other kids chanted as the boy got onto his tippy-toes.

A tense moment, then he opened his hand and smiled big.

Hoots and hollers erupted all around.

Gordon just stared, confused.

"This way," the technician called, leading Gordon to a glass wall, a brightly lit room beyond. It reminded him of the glass wall he peered through when Lonny was born, filled with newborns being swaddled. But there were no babies here – just tanks of steaming liquid, dozens of them, each with a robotic laser aimed into the fluid. Gordon watched as the flickering beams etched out precision sets of Carbons, each pair robotically lifted from its steaming tank, then washed and dried and deposited into a small black jewelry box. It was mesmerizing – box after box shuttled down a silver conveyor to an exit window.

"Here you go" the technician said, handing a box to Gordon. "I recommend you try them out before you leave. Our dressing rooms are over there."

Gordon glanced down at the box, nervous.

Noticing his angst, the technician added – "Or, if you need a little help, a class starts any minute." And she gestured to a table where a few older men and women were waiting.

That's when Gordon spotted a young boy opening his own little box. "Do they have night-vision boosters," the kid asked a salesman, "and instant-replay?"

"These are Carbon 22's," the salesman smiled. "They have everything."

The kid popped the Carbons into his eyes like it was nothing.

"Everything I need is in the box?" Gordon asked the technician.

"Plug and play!"

#

It was a small white room no larger than a walk-in closet. Gordon was seated at a smooth white counter, the little black box before him, a large mirror ahead. A nervous breath and he opened the box, revealing two contact lenses, black as charcoal, and tiny wireless earbuds. That was it – nothing else, certainly nothing that looked like instructions. Gordon huffed, unsure what to do next. In response, a bright green light began flashing on the earbuds.

Gordon pondered, then grabbed the buds and popped them in, pushing them deep.

"Greetings Mr. Pines," rang a cheerful female voice. "Can you hear me alright?"

Gordon nodded, motion sensors in the buds detecting his response.

"Wonderful!" the voice gushed. "It's soooooo exciting to meet you."

Gordon grunted, skeptical.

"From your profile, I see this is your first pair of Carbons. Is that right?"

Gordon nodded again.

"Stupendous!" And with that, a little green light began flashing inside the box, this time beside the contact lenses. "Go head, touch one with your fingertip."

Gordon slowly reached. The instant he made contact, the lens shimmered, still black as charcoal, but now oddly reflective. It clung to his finger by electrostatic attraction.

"Perfect," the voice encouraged, "now put it in."

SPRING INTO SCIFI : 2021 EDITION

A deep breath and Gordon slowly lifted his finger, guiding himself in the mirror. But each time he got near his instincts stopped him from touching his own eye.

"The first time is hard," the voice eased. "Try looking past your finger, not at it."

Gordon tried again, hand shaking, eyes tearing, until... the lens leap off his finger and jumped onto his eye, driven by electrostatic force. Then, as if by magic, the lens began to shimmer, becoming reflective for a moment before going perfectly transparent.

"Good job!" the voice exclaimed. "You're halfway there."

Gordon smiled, reaching for the other lens.

It took a few tries, and a few angry snarls, but he did it.

"You rock!" sang the voice in his ears. "Now, double-blink."

"Double-what?"

"Blink twice, fast... it's how you turn them on."

Gordon blinked as instructed, and flash – a glowing grid appeared over his visual field. It began as a sheet of simple green lines but quickly molded itself to the contours of the room, coating the smooth white walls and the glossy white counter. Another flash, and the grid melted away, replaced by virtual overlays. The featureless walls were now covered by elegant velvet wallpaper, the drab counter replaced by rich mahogany, the linoleum floor now Italian marble.

"Whoa..." Gordon whispered.

"Amazing, isn't it? These are Carbon 22s. Everything is spatially registered with near perfect precision, not to mention the optimized color-blending."

Gordon wasn't listening. He was too busy admiring the antique wooden moldings around the impressive oak door. "It looks so real," he muttered.

"I set your defaults to *Classical Décor* with *Victorian Accents*," the voice explained, "but you're welcome to change the settings.

There are over 2,000 variations to choose from."

That's when something small fluttered into Gordon's view. For a moment he thought it was a dragonfly, but then saw – it was a tiny flying woman, like a modern Tinkerbell.

"I'm Una," she burst, giddy as ever. "I'm here to help."

Gordon gaped, "You're... a fairy?"

"Technically I'm an elf," Una laughed, "an *Electronic Life Facilitator*. Because your settings are Victorian, my aesthetic adopts the *fairy genre*. Would like to reconfigure me?"

"What... why?" Gordon reeled.

"Because I'm yours," the fairy replied. "I'm your Life Facilitator."

Una fluttered closer, now hovering inches from Gordon's nose. "Life is hard these days," she explained, "not just for you, for everyone – so many places to go and things to do, endless details to track and decisions to make. I can help you, with... well... everything."

Gordon just stared, speechless.

That's when Una flew towards his right shoulder.

"This is where I usually stay," she said, hovering by his ear. "From here I can help without getting in the way. Only you can see me, nobody else. I'm *your* elf."

Gordon eyed his reflection in the mirror, dumbfounded by the adorable fairy floating over his shoulder. Finally he asked, "So... can I go home now?"

"Of course!" beamed Una. "But we should get your halo installed first."

"My what?"

"Your halo. It's how you present yourself to the world."

Una gestured, and flash – a glowing cloud appeared over Gordon's head in the mirror, his name printed boldly upon it, along with his age and interests, his favorite music and movies,

and even a mention of his profession – retired middle school teacher.

“People can see all that?” Gordon gasped.

“It’s just the default. You can add whatever you want – images, videos, theme songs...”

“No, no, no.” Gordon interrupted. “I don’t want all that. I don’t want *any of that*.”

“Why not?” Una seemed surprised.

“*Why not?*”

Una waited, her algorithms highly skilled in the use of awkward silence.

“Because...” Gordon struggled, “...just, *because!*”

Una smiled kindly, as she detected a rise in Gordon’s stress from the blood pressure readings in his earbuds. “How about we go minimalist?” she offered. “Just your first and last name. We can add more once you get familiar with the features and benefits.”

“Fine,” Gordon shot.

Una gestured and the glowing halo condensed to just his name in a plain font.

“*So, can I go home now?*” Gordon asked with tone.

“Of course!”

#

Exiting the changing room, Gordon barely took two steps when his eyes went wide. The store was now an explosion of images and animations, appearing and dissolving, expanding and contracting, fluttering and flickering. In every direction, people were fingering objects in the air, tapping and stretching and pulling, while elaborate halos floated over their heads.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Una whispered in his ear.

Gordon was silent, overcome by a sudden need for fresh

air. As he rushed across the busy store, glowing advertisements leapt out at him, bursting into view with big smiling faces that touted the benefits of some new product or service. Each time it happened, Gordon recoiled and stepped around the garish ad.

“You can walk through them,” Una laughed, “they’re harmless.”

But Gordon wasn’t listening, his attention drawn to the circle of kids on the floor. They were now cheering a small girl as she reached upward, hand outstretched. It was just like before, but now Gordon could see the medieval castle of simulated blocks at the center of the group.

“Careful!” a boy exclaimed.

Gordon watched as the girl delicately placed a block atop the tallest spire.

The simulated tower swayed, drawing gasps, but didn’t fall.

Cheers erupted all around.

Even Gordon smiled.

#

The city was ablaze with color and motion, pulsing and throbbing, every inch vying for Gordon’s attention as he walked down the street. It wasn’t just the storefronts, which erupted onto the sidewalk with leggy supermodels strutting the latest fashions, or the restaurants that tempted passersby with steaming plates of simulated food, it was all the apartments above too. Every window was splashed with colorful nonsense, from local gossip and personal ads, to shrines to favorite musical groups and movie stars.

“It’s a lot to take in,” Una whispered, as if she could read Gordon’s mind. Of course, she couldn’t. She simply had access to Data Central, the vast database that correlated human sentiments to the speed of their gaits and the stiffness of their

shoulders, even the dilation of their pupils. Using this data, Una determined with 98% certainty that Gordon was feeling utterly overwhelmed. "Change is hard," she said softly, trying to put him at ease.

"Change is for the young," he grumbled.

Just then, a sim-airplane crossed the sky. It was pulling a long glowing banner that read, "*JENNY, WILL YOU MARRY ME?*" All around, people were smiling and pointing.

Suddenly, a sim-rocket roared into the air. It exploded into sim-fireworks, the embers spelling out, "*YES DAVE, OF COURSE!*" Applause erupted from everyone on the street.

Everyone but Gordon.

Una noticed. "You'll find someone too," she said kindly.

Gordon grunted.

"You will," she insisted, "and I can help you."

Gordon looked at the tiny fairy hovering over his shoulder.

"I can," she repeated.

#

Early morning light filtered through the curtains, casting soft rays onto Gordon's bed. His eyes popped open and he released a lavish yawn. But before he could sit up and stretch, Una floated into view, hovering just above him. "Morning Gordy," she bubbled, "beautiful day!"

He rubbed his eyes, groggy.

"They're forecasting clear skies," she added, "mild temperatures in the 70s."

Gordon sat up and glanced around. His apartment was now enhanced by elaborate overlays, giving his normally dull bedroom the stately feel of an old English manor.

"Would you like the ten-day forecast?" Una asked.

"I'm good," Gordon mumbled.

"How about the headlines?" Una continued, making a glass sheet appear in the air, the latest news from around the world glowing upon it.

"I'm good," Gordon repeated, firmer.

"Also, Lonny left you a message while you were—"

"Give me a minute," Gordon huffed. "I'm still waking up."

He then stood and headed for the bathroom. Una followed, silent, hovering over his shoulder. It wasn't until Gordon was standing at the toilet, pants around his knees, that he noticed her floating there. "What the hell?" he snapped. "Some privacy!"

"Sorry," and she eased backwards out of the bathroom. Then, as the sound of peeing rang, she added – "Just so you know, my input comes from your Carbons and the spatial database, not from the projected location of my animated—"

Slam – Gordon shut the door.

Una made a mental note, *no bathrooms*. She was designed to be adaptive, adjusting the needs of her host, even to quirks that defied logic. Gordon was far less adaptive, wondering as he pulled up his pants, if this was a big mistake.

He exited the bathroom and headed across his apartment.

Una followed over his shoulder. Gordon couldn't quite see her there, but he could sense her presence, as he might sense an unseen person in the room with him. And although he wanted to remain annoyed, he couldn't help but realize – it felt good not to be alone.

Una detected the mood change from the blood pressure readings in his earbuds. And because she had access to Gordon's full history, including the fact that he lost his wife to a tragic illness five years prior, she knew that loneliness and isolation were the biggest burdens in his life. In fact, her algorithms had already begun formulating a plan to help him.

"So, Gordy..." she eased as they entered the kitchen, "what exciting things do you have on the agenda for today?"

SPRING INTO SCIFI : 2021 EDITION

Gordon had nothing planned and suspected Una knew that. Still, he was happy to make small talk – “I can’t decide between skydiving and drag racing. What do you think?”

“I think you’re avoiding the question,” Una returned with a grin. Then, as Gordon reached for a bag of French Roast, she flew in front him. “Why not go out for coffee?”

“Go out?” Gordon stiffened. “I can make perfectly good coffee here.”

“I’m sure you can, but you’re not going to meet anyone here.”

Gordon scoffed and stepped to a cabinet, reaching for the sugar.

Una flew out in front of him. “There are nine coffeehouses in easy walking distance,” she pressed, “and three are frequented by single women in your age-group.”

“My age-group?” Gordon fired back. “What does that mean?”

“It means, you’re avoiding the issue.”

Gordon grunted.

Una held firm – “You want to meet someone or not?”

Gordon sat at a small table in a busy San Francisco coffeehouse, a steaming mug in hand. As promised, the clientele was mostly his generation, mostly singles, and mostly women. This was no accident, as the majority of patrons had been coached here by their Carbons, with younger generations and couples directed to other establishments.

Setting down his coffee, Gordon scanned the room. Almost everyone here had bright halos hovering over them, their names aglow along with their favorite books and movies, and of course, photos of their kids and grandkids. Every so often, Gordon noticed someone rise and walk to another table, introducing themselves then sitting for a conversation.

“Excuse me,” a bald man said to a chubby woman, “do you grow roses?”

“For thirty years,” the woman smiled. Of course, the man already knew this from her halo, which was swirling with images of her award-winning flowers.

“I’m just getting started,” the man said. “But already, I’ve got black spots.” He opened his hand, revealing the floating image of a rosebush, its sickly leaves dark and splotchy.

“Oh, that’s fungus,” the woman explained and invited him to sit.

As Gordon watched them fall into conversation, his confidence grew, thinking this might not be as difficult as he feared. After all, he wasn’t bad looking and knew he could be charming when he tried. That’s when he noticed a silver-haired woman across the room. There was something about her – a kindness in her face that drew him in.

Una too was aware of Gordon’s interest, for his Carbons tracked not only the direction of his gaze but the intensity of his focus and rhythm of his pulse. So when the woman stood and walked toward Gordon, Una was monitoring his rising anticipation. But then, as the woman walked past and sat at another table, Una also noted his abrupt disappointment.

“We should update your halo,” Una whispered. “It’s a barrier.”

Gordon glanced to his shoulder, skeptical.

“Do you want to meet someone or not?”

Gordon wanted to argue, but everyone here had elaborate halos.

“Fine,” he conceded, “but keep it simple.”

“Of course!” And with that, Una flew out in front of Gordon, a shin-mirror in her hand. She held it up so Gordon could see his own halo. As before, it was merely his name in simple letters. With a few quick gestures, Una added colorful elements – images of Gordon with his kids and grandkids, old classroom

photos from when he taught middle school, even a few favorite album covers of Miles Davis and John Coltrane, as he was a lifelong jazz fan.

Gordon felt ridiculous.

"Sure you don't want to add my medical history," he tossed, "and credit score?"

"No need," Una returned, ignoring the sarcasm. "But I do recommend we install *Matchmaker Plus*. It gives me access to advanced Romance Features."

"Romance Features?"

"The success rate is very high."

That's when Gordon noticed another woman walking towards him. He assumed she would walk past, but she stopped and smiled. "Anyone sitting here?"

"Um, no..." Gordon stammered, gesturing at the empty seat. "It's all yours."

"You're a doll," and the woman dragged the chair back to her own table.

Gordon released a heavy breath. "Fine, install it."

"Fantabulous!" Una exclaimed. "*System, install Matchmaker Plus.*"

A flash of light, then a tiny pink heart appeared in Gordon's peripheral vision. Another flash, and Una's wings began to glow the same pink color. She fluttered them for a moment, as if trying them out. This sent a puff of pink glitter into the air. "It's so exciting!"

"Now what?" Gordon asked.

"Now this," and Una sped away from the table, a trail of pink behind her.

Gordon gawked as Una blazed around the coffeehouse – a tiny comet darting from table to table, woman to woman, hovering over each for just a moment.

And then... she was back, stopping inches from Gordon's

nose. "There are two women here who have potential," she said out of breath, "but neither has a Compatibility Index in the highest data-bracket. I recommend extending the search. How about a half-mile radius?"

"Um... sure," Gordon reeled.

"Stupendous!"

And with that, Una blasted across the room and out the front door, a steaming trail of pink left behind. Gordon expected everyone to be stunned by the spectacle, but there was no reaction, for only he could see Una. That's when Gordon wondered how many other little fairies were buzzing around this place, whispering in ears, nudging and coaxing and prodding. Was this really a good thing for us all, or–

Whoosh – before he could finish the thought, a tiny pink comet shot back into the coffeehouse, blazing to a halt right in front of him. "I found someone!" Una burst.

"You did?"

"She's just down the street," Una beamed, "and her Compatibility Index is 97.8!"

"Is that good?"

"It's remarkable!"

#

Gordon followed Una down a busy sidewalk, struggling to keep up with her pace. Along the way, countless advertisements leaped out at him, pitching everything from vitamin pills to health clubs. That's when a familiar voice rang. Gordon turned and saw his barber stepping out of his shop. At least it looked like his barber – really, it was a virtual overlay.

"Gordy, I haven't seen you in weeks," the sim-barber gushed. "I'll give you a trim for half-price if you jump in the chair right now."

Gordon kept walking. He reached every intersection with perfect timing. This was no accident – it was because Una, like all elves, monitored traffic signals, modulating the walking speed of her host for optimal efficiency. It was a public service, ensuring everyone got where they were going without crowds waiting at the crosswalks.

“How much further?” Gordon asked, now feeling the pace in his legs.

“Almost there,” Una replied. “Her name is Caroline, by the way. She’s 64 years old, widowed for three. She lives in North Beach but is currently in Washington Square Park walking her dog. He’s a twelve-year-old schnauzer named Frankie.”

“A schnauzer?” Gordon interjected. “I had three schnauzers. I love schnauzers!”

“I told you, she’s a remarkable match.”

As they rounded a corner, Una kept up the pace, determined to get to the park before Caroline left. Fortunately, Caroline had her own elf running Matchmaker Plus, which meant Una could coordinate the encounter over wireless channels. This was important, as Frankie had just completed his *morning business* and Caroline was about to head home. Her elf intervened, noting that the old dog was panting and might need some water.

Caroline responded as expected, taking a quick break on a bench.

That’s when Gordon entered the park. The place was packed with people – jogging and cycling, pushing strollers and walking dogs. He might have had trouble finding Caroline if not for the pink dotted line Una projected on the pavement. “I feel like Pac-Man,” Gordon snarked as he followed the glowing dots. “Should I be looking for ghosts and cherries?”

Una didn’t respond.

Meanwhile, Caroline was focused on Frankie, trying to get him to drink.

“Don’t look up,” her elf whispered, “but it appears you have a suitor coming this way.”

“Wonderful,” Caroline sighed, “just what I need.”

“His name is Gordon Pines,” her elf continued. “He’s 65 years old, widowed for five. And you’ll be interested to know, he was a middle school teacher just like you.”

“Big deal,” Caroline grumbled to her elf, who wasn’t a fairy like Una, but a wise old genie named Kai. He had a long gray beard and floated on a tiny flying carpet.

“His Compatibility Index is quite strong,” Kai insisted. “The best so far.”

“I told you, I’m done with Matchmaker Plus.”

The little genie rolled his eyes.

That’s when Gordon approached. He hadn’t felt this awkward since he was a pimply teenager seeking a date for the spring dance. Sensing his unease, Una whispered – “Just smile and take a breath, then comment on her dog.”

So Gordon did. “Nice whiskers,” he said boldly, forcing Caroline to look up at him. “And such a big fella – too big to be a Standard, but not quite a Giant.”

“You know schnauzers?” Caroline replied, skeptical.

“Outlived three of them,” Gordon returned. “Best breed there is.” This was followed by an awkward silence, but after prodding from Una, Gordon added – “So, what’s his name?”

“Frankie.” Caroline softened. “He’s a Standard, but a very big boy.”

Another silence, then Una whispered, “Tell her your name.”

“Oh, I’m Gordon, by the way.”

“I’m Caroline,” she returned politely, but didn’t invite him to sit, even though Kai was suggesting it quite forcefully in her ear. She just wasn’t sure it was a good idea.

That’s when Gordon reached out and let Frankie smell his hand, for he knew that was the proper way to introduce yourself

to a dog. He then scratched behind Frankie's ears, as skillful as any serious dog-lover. The schnauzer stretched and wriggled, indulging in the attention.

"He likes you," Caroline noted, her gaze softening.

"He's such a big fella," Gordon smiled, genuine.

"Please, sit..." Caroline finally offered. "It'll make Frankie's day."

So Gordon sat, instantly getting a large dog in his lap.

Silent seconds passed as both Caroline and Gordon pretended to focus on Frankie, but really, they were stealing glances at each other's halo. Gordon noticed Caroline's love for old movies. Caroline noticed Gordon's passion for jazz. And then, at the nearly the same instant, they both said with feigned surprised – "You taught middle school too?"

"Jinx," Caroline joked. "*Some coincidence*, huh?"

Gordon laughed. "*Totally random.*"

They shared a moment, both wondering if this might not be a disaster after all. But then Caroline squinted as if annoyed. Gordon thought he must have done something wrong, but then realized – her irritation wasn't aimed at him, but at her own shoulder.

"No," she whispered, "that's a terrible idea."

Gordon was instantly charmed, as he'd never seen someone argue with their elf before.

"Sorry," Caroline turned back. "Kai says I should ask what school you taught at."

"Well, if Kai insists," Gordon snarked. "Laguna Middle, for thirty-five years."

"Thirty-five years at one school!" Caroline was genuinely impressed. "Did they at least give you a gold pen when you retired?"

"Silver," Gordon teased, "budget cuts."

They shared another moment. And another silence. That's

when Gordon glanced at his own shoulder. He tried to be subtle, but Caroline could see he was resisting a suggestion.

"Let's hear it," she pressed.

Gordon turned back, surprised he was that obvious. "Ok, well... Una says I should ask about your grandkids. Seems cliché to me, but she's confident it will go over well."

"*Cliché indeed*," Caroline tossed. "I think you might need an upgrade."

"Just an upgrade?" Gordon matched her tone. "I definitely need a total overhaul."

Smiles – real smiles – possibly the first real smiles either had shared in weeks.

And yet, both were at a loss for words.

For Gordon, it wasn't that he lacked things to say. It was that people these days were usually put-off by his comments, discounting him as *grumpy* or *out of touch*. In truth, he just didn't understand the obsession everyone had with constant change. *Lose your wife of 35 years*, he wanted to tell people, *then see how much you like change*. Of course, that wasn't what Una was suggesting. She was prodding him to mention his love of photography or his fondness for travel. Meanwhile, Kai was coaching Caroline to bring up her passion for playing piano. It was a reasonable suggestion but it just *didn't feel right* to her.

That's when they both realized, they were eyeing their own shoulders for way too long. At almost the same moment, they turned back to each other and laughed.

"Should we just talk about our grandkids?" Gordon joked.

Caroline smiled, then fell serious. "To be honest, I hate these things," she admitted, gesturing to her eyes. "I mean, they're remarkable devices, useful for sure, but sometimes I wonder, if... well..." She paused, searching for words.

"I thought it was just me," Gordon offered, saving her the trouble.

That's when a chatty group of young parents walked by pushing strollers, their halos aglow with rainbows and unicorns – an arms race of digital cuteness. One of the moms stopped and knelt down, scolding her daughter for tossing a candy wrapper onto the pavement. It was a reasonable interaction, and yet Gordon couldn't help but wonder if it was really the mom who was disciplining the girl, or an invisible elf whispering in the mom's ear.

"This can't be the way things were supposed go," Gordon pondered as the bubbly group walked away. "It can't be, and yet nobody questions it – nobody seems to mind at all."

"Oh, they mind," Caroline returned, "but what choice does anyone have?"

Gordon nodded, solemn and serious, but inside he was smiling ear to ear. That's because somebody finally said what he'd been thinking for years – that none of this was a choice, even if nobody was willing to admit it out loud. And yet, the world seemed a little different now as he sat there on that hard wooden bench, gazing upon all the busy people rushing past, everyone glowing and glistening, moderated and facilitated, augmented from head to toe.

"Maybe this is all just growing pains," he finally said.

"Growing pains?"

"A mix of good and bad, but eventually we'll figure it all out."

That's when a teenage boy walked by, his halo filled with bikini-clad women and gory posters from horror films, plus an animation of himself barfing in a toilet, again and again.

Caroline smirked, "*Growing pains?*"

"We can hope," Gordon tossed. Then serious, "The truth is, I have no idea where this is all headed, but I do know one thing for sure," and he gestured to his eyes. "Without these, you and I wouldn't be sitting here right now, and I for one am sincerely glad we are."

"Me too," Caroline smiled.

And with that, she handed Frankie's leash to Gordon and stood from the bench, gesturing for him to join her. So Gordon did, feeling nervous but surprisingly hopeful.

Together they strolled the park, laughing and smiling and getting to know each other. Of course they had their awkward moments, but mostly they were amazed by how easy it was to keep the conversation going, mile upon mile, hour upon hour, long after they had powered off their Carbons. And it wasn't just while walking Frankie, but over coffee, and over dinner, and over the days and weeks and years to come.

It turns out, they really were a remarkable match.

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